

## Infanticide

### Sermon for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Day of Christmas

Sermon Text: Matthew 2:13-23



*Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."<sup>14</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt<sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."<sup>16</sup> Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.<sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: <sup>18</sup>"A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."<sup>19</sup> But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,<sup>20</sup> saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead."<sup>21</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.<sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.<sup>23</sup> And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that He would be called a Nazarene.*

Bethlehem, the place that makes us think of Christmas: the silent birth in the stable, the Baby in the manger, the shepherds in the field and the shining light from which the angel appears to announce this birth, and finally also the wise men from the East who followed the star to find the Child. These are all wonderful Christmas stories that make us feel good. A mother or father whose child was killed by Herod shortly after Jesus' birth, would bring a completely different feeling to Bethlehem. This story so soon after Christmas, in which Herod has all newborn children killed, is truly one of the most horrible stories in the Bible. That is irrefutable. Horrible because in the back of our minds is the question: "How could God let this happen?" and "How could God let Baby Jesus be saved but not the others?" We still can't answer this question today, just as we can't answer questions about the many other evil events in our world. If it's about evil, people remain truly hopeless and powerless in our attempts to explain all this. But the problem with such horrible things is that they don't stop. If we maybe got the idea that we no longer have any evil kings who simply kill children, then we are greatly mistaken. That still happens today, worse even. According to some calculations, Herod killed 10-15 children at that time. Today, about 40 children will die of starvation again and such children only need about 20 cents per day to survive. Despite clear scientific information that humanity has caused a tremendous environmental crisis, everyone goes about as though nothing has happened. And the first to suffer the consequences of such things are always the children, above all the poorest children. So we can't place ourselves too far above Herod, after all, doesn't a little bit of him hide inside all of us? That's why we should never omit this story of infanticide from the Christmas story. We also must not skip this story because in it, it becomes clear that people really have no room for Jesus and would prefer to kill Him: "He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him," John writes in chapter 1 of his Gospel. And that became clear not only in the nativity story when Jesus didn't find an inn, but also afterwards when Jesus had to flee to Egypt with His parents. Even much later when His family could return to Nazareth, Joseph was still afraid of Herod's son, Archelaus. All this shows us that Christ, even as a child, was already exposed to real dangers.

It wasn't just back then that our Savior found no room and had to flee. That still continues today. Jesus is still rejected, persecuted, and killed today as the Christ child. How are we to understand this? Here's a little example: Pastor Joseph Wittig shares a memory from his childhood about how he, along with his sisters, would perform the children's Christmas program. But because he was the only boy, he had to play the role of Joseph as well as the role of evil king Herod. The pastor reports how he was glad to play the hero, Joseph, who would save Mary and the Baby Jesus and bring them to safety in the first part. In the next part, however, he had to then play Herod the executioner who would seek to snuff out the child's life. The pastor then remembered that at one point, he loudly protested from the kitchen: "I'm going to just stay as Joseph. You all can play Herod!" But his sisters forced him to be Herod anyway because there were

no other boys there to do it. Joseph Wittig uses this childhood story to explain how his church thinks about Baby Jesus. He tells how as Christians, we sometimes receive Baby Jesus into our hearts with great joy and enthusiasm. Who doesn't experience a time like this? For many, it is the time around their baptism and as they are preparing to be baptized. How are we not full of joy and courage of faith? We would do everything to keep Jesus in our hearts, protect Him from dangers, and to strengthen Him through daily remorse and repentance and by regularly going to the Lord's Supper. But then, who doesn't also know about the other side? Joseph Wittig tells about his own life and here he tells about what many other Christians experienced and continue to experience. It's nothing more than what Paul writes of in Romans 7:18 - "For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." And so, it appears that Christians, sometimes precisely in our attempts to do what is good, are, at the same time, awful. In our crazy zeal, we fight, but we fight for the wrong thing. In our zeal, Christ in our hearts is forgotten. We are like Herod. We are afraid to lose our own dignity. That's why we are easily hurt and lash out when others fight over our place of honor. Yes, it's not a coincidence that Herod came from the midst of the people of Israel. From his throne came the fierce battle against the Baby Jesus. In doing so, he thought he was doing something good. What happened at that time in the historical events around Bethlehem happens again and again. What becomes even more clear is that God Himself is being attacked. We do what Satan does, what Adam and Eve wanted to do in Paradise. We want to argue with God about His own position, we want to be like God. Sometimes we do that from the center of things. As Herod came from the midst of the people, we come from the center of the Church. Yes, we receive the Child. We bear His name through our Baptism. We receive and eat and drink of His body and blood Sunday after Sunday... but honestly, how often are our thoughts filled with Herod-like murderous thoughts? How often are we jealous if something good happens to our Brothers and Sisters in Christ and how often are we amused when bad things happen to other people? Yes, sometimes we fight back against the bad thoughts. We sit like Joseph Wittig practicing for the Nativity play in the warm kitchen and shout loudly: "I don't want to be Herod, I'd rather be Joseph who protected the Baby and brought Him to safety!" But before we know it, the old Herod reappears and with him, the long blades that can cause such terrible damage. Maybe it happens much faster for us. When we are irritated with the mass media, it is difficult for us to cherish the Child with a believing heart. It is much easier to take on the role of Herod. Perhaps because it has also become difficult to look for the Child in His Word and to keep Him in our hearts. And as we deal with Jesus in our hearts, and neglect or even kill Him, we do the same with our Brothers and Sisters in Christ. We act all warm and friendly with them but then we trample them underfoot again.

Now I have a question about all this: What could be the point of all this? Why should the Holy Child come to be despised and persecuted by His own, as the Evangelist John says? Matthew says it again and again – this all happened so that the Scripture may be fulfilled. He makes it clear here that God is behind everything. The politician Herod and the other people devise their own evil plans. But God has a completely different plan and no human can dissuade God from His plan. God's plan is for the salvation of the world and the salvation of people just like us. So Christ deliberately subjects Himself to persecution. Jesus knowingly allows Himself to be despised and disowned. He is not deceived or cheated by people, He knows all this from the beginning and nevertheless, His goal remains completely steady and sure. His goal is to save people, to save us. Unlike the children's nativity play where one boy who plays Joseph can then play Herod and then go back to playing Joseph, Jesus always remains Jesus. Jesus remains our Savior despite our guilt, He remains our Savior because of our guilt. I can't really comprehend all this. When I read the horrible story about Bethlehem and also the terrible events that happen in our world, I remember that God has a plan of salvation in spite of everything. Yes, it is precisely because of such things that He has a plan for our salvation which is His answer against evil. Amen.